

# The COVID-19 pandemic and the early years workforce

March - August 2020:  
Staffing decisions in an uncertain environment







National Day Nurseries Association

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## Method

The survey was conducted with early years settings across England, Scotland and Wales between 4 - 26 August and open to all private, voluntary and independently run providers. The survey asked providers about the period from March, when lock-down measures began, to August 2020 when the survey was conducted.

Questions were asked that were relevant and specific to the context of each country. In presenting the results the England and Wales qualification levels have been used. Respondents in Scotland answered equivalent qualification levels: Level 2 or SVQ2/NC; Level 3 or SVQ3/HNC; Level 4/5 or SVQ4/PDA8; Level 6 or PDA9 / graduate. When discussing children with additional needs in Scotland respondents answered about Additional Support Needs and SEN/Additional Learning Needs in Wales.

Where one response represented more than one setting (e.g. where we received a response on behalf of a chain of settings), we weighted their response accordingly.

For calculations of the proportion of staff who had been furloughed, made redundant etc., we used the following method. Where respondents told us the number of staff employed in March 2020, and the number of staff who had been (e.g.) furloughed, we divided the latter by the former to produce a proportion of staff who had been furloughed.

Where settings reported having furloughed or made redundant more staff since March than they had employed in March, we did not include their response in averages on the assumption that this response was a typo or misunderstanding of the question.

For each of the figures in this report we have included in square brackets the total number of responses we received to the question (the base).

*We are grateful to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) which is supporting this research as part of the Association's response to the ongoing COVID-19 situation*



## Characteristics of settings

We received 400 responses, representing 445 early years settings. Most respondents answered most questions. The number of settings responding to individual questions open to all respondents ranged from 156 to 356.



**445**  
SETTINGS



**4,446**  
EY STAFF

77% of respondents are based in England, with 15% based in Wales and 8% based in Scotland [273 responses].

88% of settings are currently open [310 responses]. Of those that were closed, most (83%) were expecting to open in September, with only 7% expecting to open in August and 10% unsure [42 responses].

Most settings were standalone, with 35% being part of a chain [356 responses].

The average (mean) number of staff employed at each setting was 17 in total [256 responses]; **in total the survey represents the responses of early year providers representing at least 4,446 staff.** Of all staff represented by respondents, 15% had no qualifications, 5% were apprentices, 9% held a Level 2 qualification (or Scottish equivalent), 54% a level 3 qualification, 9% a level 4 or 5 qualification and 9% a level 6 qualification.

## Introduction

This is the first in a series of four short reports summarising the findings of four quarterly surveys of early education and childcare providers in Great Britain. We are seeking to understand the impact that the current COVID-19 pandemic is having on the staffing decisions of early years providers in the private, voluntary and independent sectors. Early years providers face a variety of challenges, which look set to change considerably over the next year, from changes in the demand for childcare among parents to changes to the schemes of government support available such as through the government's furlough scheme.

The evidence is clear that high quality staff - motivated, well-qualified and with access to good CPD opportunities - are key to supporting children's early development. However, even before the current crisis, the early years workforce in Great Britain faced a variety of challenges, with previous EPI research finding that workers faced low and falling 'real terms' pay, while providers frequently reported difficulties hiring staff, particularly those who were well qualified. The current crisis threatens to exacerbate these issues.

Over the course of these four surveys, to be carried out between August 2020 and May 2021, we hope to shine a light on the impact on the staffing decisions of early years providers of the current pandemic as it evolves.

## Staff

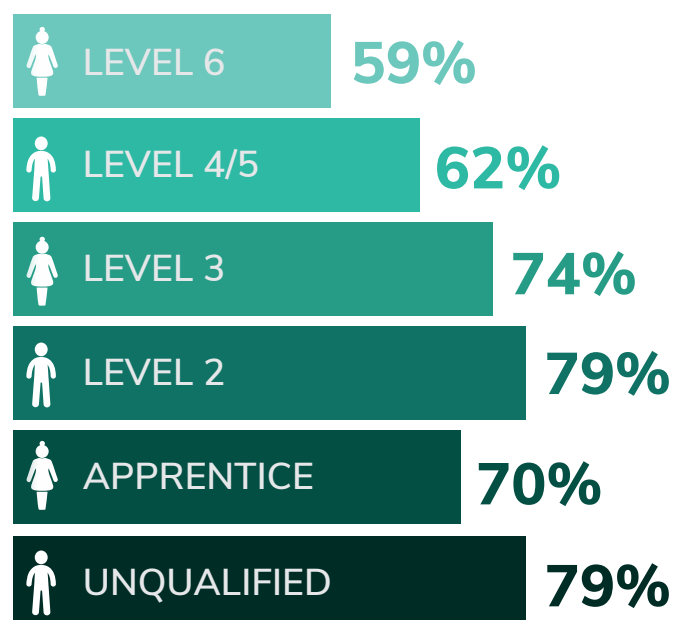
Looking at the size of the workforce we asked settings how many staff they employed in March 2020 and how many were employed at the time of the survey in August. Settings reported employing on average 9% fewer staff in August than they had in March [257 responses].

Of those settings who told us how many staff they had employed in March 2020 and how many staff they had furloughed since March 2020, on average, **employers had furloughed 71% of their staff.**

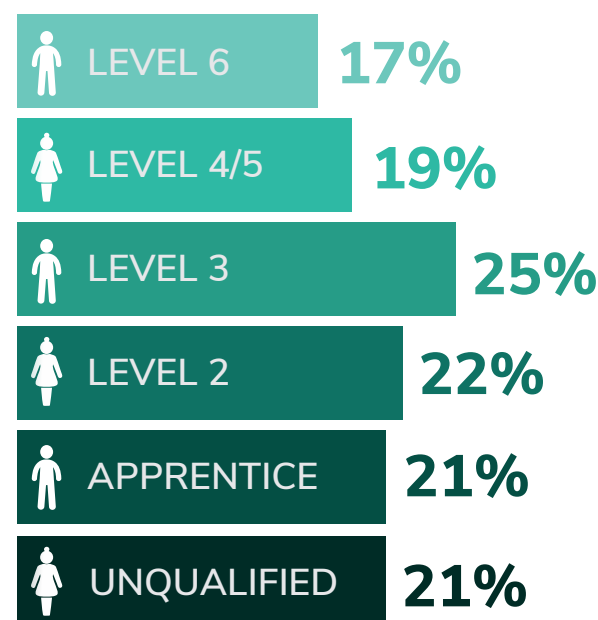
**The staff most likely to be furloughed were those who held lower levels of qualifications** (79% of staff with no qualifications had been furloughed, 79% of staff with level 2 qualifications, 74% of staff with level 3, falling to 59% of staff with level 6 qualifications) [Between 142 and 251 responses].



### Staff furloughed full time (March - Aug)\*



### Staff furloughed part time (July - Aug)



On average, **employers had placed 25% of their staff on part time furlough** between July 1st and August. **Staff with the highest levels of qualifications were least likely to be furloughed part time** (19% of staff with level 4/5 and 17% of staff with level 6 were furloughed part time). [Between 137 and 243 responses] \*The qualifications levels displayed are for England and Wales and include the equivalent qualifications in Scotland. For a comparison see this chart: <https://eal.org.uk/support/document-library/7-uk-qualifications-comparison-table/file>

On average, 4% of staff had been made redundant. Staff with higher qualifications were the least likely to be made redundant (e.g. 2% of staff with L4/5, 1% of staff with L6 v 5% of staff with no qualifications and 6% of apprentices) [232 respondents answered this question for at least one qualification level; the minimum number of responses per qualification level was 132 and the max 232].

#### Staff made redundant



7% of staff voluntarily terminated their contract. Those with lower levels of quals were most likely to do so. The most common reasons given by staff for terminating their contract were **finding alternative employment** during furlough (30% of settings reported this), personal or family health concerns related to the virus (20%) and insufficient job security (13%) [Between 121 and 221 responses].

#### Voluntary terminations



Employers had reduced the contracted hours of 15% of staff on average. This was highest for staff with Level 3 qualifications (16%), lowest for staff with level 6 qualifications (11%) and apprentices (8%). [Between 104 and 188 responses]



## Furlough and redundancy

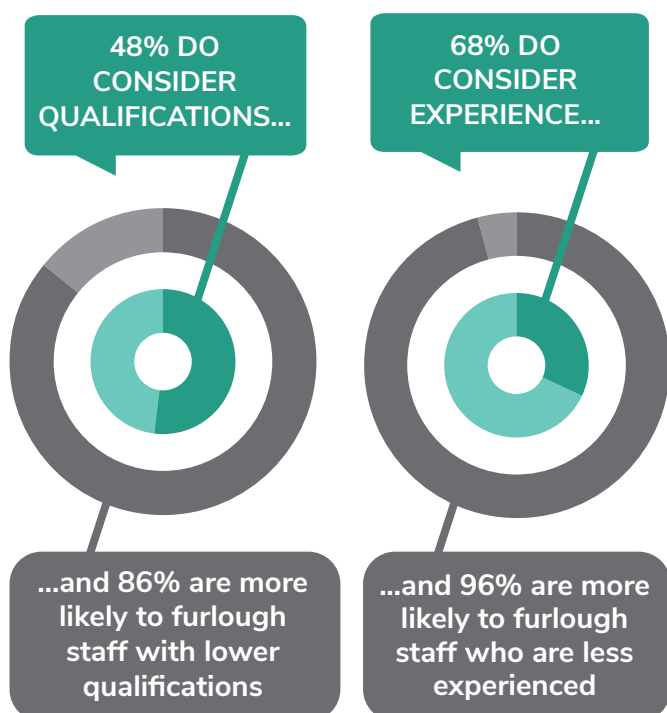
On average, settings expected to furlough 3 staff in the three months between August and October, representing on average nearly a fifth (18%) of staff employed at present [213 responses]. Settings that had made a greater than average proportion of staff redundant since March expected to furlough a greater proportion (26%) of their staff than settings that had made a lower than average proportion of staff redundant (16%) [201 responses].

**Only half of settings consider the qualification levels of staff when making staffing choices, while 68-74% consider experience.**

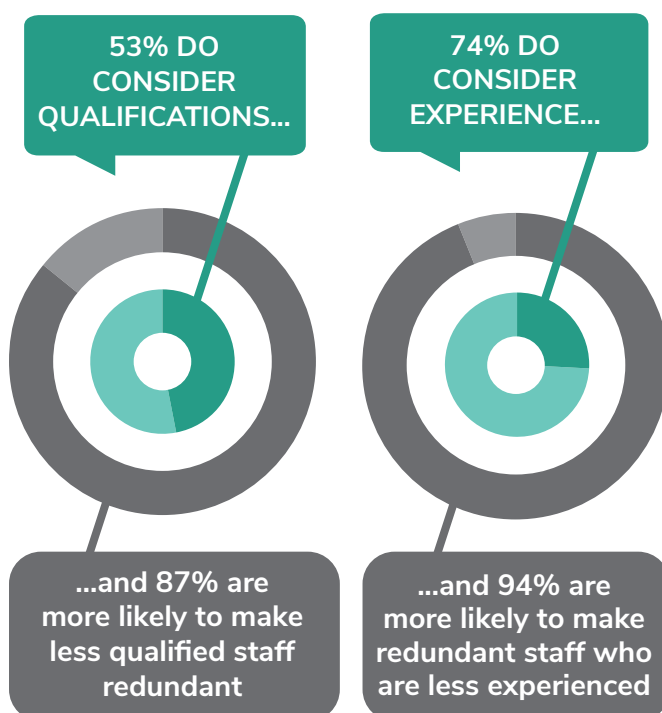
When asked whether employers took the *qualification level* of their staff into consideration when making decisions about furloughing staff, respondents were split with 52% saying they did not and 48% saying they did. [178 responses] Respondents were similarly split when asked whether they took the qualification levels of staff into account in decisions about redundancies, with 47% of settings saying they did not and 53% saying they did [156 responses].

There were higher levels of agreement among respondents on whether they took staff members' *experience* into account: **68%** of settings said they took staff members' level of experience into account when making decisions about furlough, and **74%** of settings said they did when making decisions about redundancies [166 and 175 responses respectively].

### Furlough considerations for employers



### Redundancy considerations for employers



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But when given a choice between furloughing or making redundant staff with differing levels of qualifications or experience, settings overwhelmingly chose to furlough or make redundant those staff with lower qualifications and experience.

86% of settings said that they were more likely to furlough staff with lower qualifications or no qualifications. This was from a choice between: the previous two options; staff with higher qualifications; and apprentices. A similar proportion (87%) said the same about making staff redundant.

Similarly, 96% of settings said they were more likely to furlough staff who are less experienced than those who are more experienced [150 responses], and 94% said they were more likely to make redundant staff with less experience [156 responses].

## CPD opportunities

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Most settings (89%) report that they are continuing to offer CPD to their staff [180 responses].

Of these, 30% report only offering mandatory training, with 70% saying they are offering training over and above what is required [160 responses].

When asked whether there were sufficient training opportunities available, 91% of settings said there were enough opportunities for food hygiene training and 77% said there were opportunities for infection prevention and control [Between 150-156 responses].

Meanwhile, **respondents reported insufficient opportunities for training focused on supporting children with special educational needs.**

Only 41% said there were enough opportunities for trauma and bereavement-related training, 45% said there were enough for a whole setting approach to SEN and 51% said there were enough for supporting children with autism [Between 134-141 responses].

### Challenges in accessing training

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Enough trauma and bereavement training?



59% no

A whole setting approach to SEND/ASN/ALN training?



55% no

Enough autism training?



49% no

## Conclusion

Our findings suggest that 71% of staff in early years settings have been furloughed between March and August 2020, while there are indications that the overall size of the workforce is shrinking, with settings reporting employing on average 9% fewer staff in August than they had in March.

Staff with lower qualifications are the ones most likely to have been furloughed over this period, with 79% of staff with no qualifications having been furloughed, compared to 59% of staff with a level 6 qualification. Meanwhile, the vast majority (96%) of settings said they were more likely to furlough staff who are less experienced.

Overall, our findings highlight that the early years workforce has already undergone significant changes, with the least qualified and least experienced staff bearing the brunt as they are more likely to be furloughed, made redundant, or to leave for other work. With settings expecting to furlough one in five staff over the three months until October, significant challenges lie ahead for the workforce in light of planned changes to the furlough scheme.

The evidence is clear that high quality staff - motivated, well-qualified and with access to good CPD opportunities - are key to supporting children's early development. In order to ensure that such a workforce is there to support children in the long term, governments face significant challenges to financially support early years settings to ensure they can offer the job security, pay and professionalism that staff need and deserve.

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